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# A concept analysis of bullying in midwifery

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## Abstract

**Aim.** Concept analysis is an important philosophical method of inquiry that facilitates knowledge and theory development. Rigorous research requires clear definitions of concepts and terms prior to operationalisation of the research. Bullying as a concept has not been clearly defined and this causes considerable difficulty for researchers who wish to study the nature and extent of this phenomenon. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present a philosophical analysis of the concept 'bullying', in order to have a clear understanding of the term and, in doing so, to facilitate more focused and replicable research.

**Objectives.** To analyse the concept of 'bullying'.

**Method.** The analysis is undertaken using the framework outlined by Walker and Avant (1995). Each of the stages of the analysis involves a progressive focusing on the concept so that the critical attributes can be identified.

**Findings/results.** Bullying is a complex phenomenon that crosses personal and professional boundaries. It has four defining attributes: (1) the repeated nature of the behaviour; (2) the negative effect of the behaviour on the victim; (3) the victim finds it difficult to defend him/herself (power imbalance) (4) intent of the bully.

**Implications.** One of the main challenges for research into bullying is overcoming the methodological problems of definition and this paper offers a first stage: analysis of the concept. More detailed exploration and analysis of the concept through focus-group research and large-scale surveys to estimate the nature and extent of the problem in midwifery practice and education are recommended.

**Key words:** Concept analysis, bullying, adult bullying, bullying in the midwifery workplace, organisational conflict, mobbing, horizontal violence

## Introduction

Bullying is a reality for many people within a variety of workplace environments. Many anecdotal accounts and research studies indicate that bullying in the workplace is an issue for midwives and student midwives (RCM, 1996; Ball et al, 2002; Begley, 2002). However, uncertainty remains as to an agreed definition of bullying, which is a prerequisite for any agreed action. This lack of clarity leads to uncertainty in research, policy and practice.

The first systematic description of the phenomenon of bullying by Heinemann (1972) (as cited by Olweus, 1999) explored the nature of school bullying. In the US, Brodsky (1976) wrote about the term 'harassment', with particular reference to the harassed worker. Adams (1992) was one of the first UK authors to write about bullying in the workplace (BWP). During the mid 1990s, research from European countries, Scandinavia in particular, highlighted the nature, extent and consequences of BWP (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Vartia, 1996; Niedl, 1996). In the UK, the health service unions were among the first organisations to raise the profile of BWP by undertaking their own research (RCM, 1996; UNISON, 1997; RCN, 2001). This, coupled with human rights legislation (1998) has raised public awareness. There are many research and opinion papers about BWP with researchers adopting a definition that best suits the needs of their research. This lack of consensus about a definition leads to subsequent methodological problems and difficulty in

drawing comparisons between research that is conducted nationally and internationally.

## Concept analysis

Concept analysis is a process through which existing concepts are rigorously examined, in order to determine clear and logical definitions and parameters that provide solid ground for further work, such as empirical research and putting evidence into practice. McKenna (1997) has stated that without a clear definition of a concept, any work based upon it will be problematic.

## Limitations of concept analysis

Concept analysis is not a new system of methods for inquiry (Rodgers and Knafl, 2000). It is a preliminary stage in the research process.

Every research process has limitations and concept analyses have their own problems. These have been alluded to by Walker and Avant (1995) who referred to such analyses 'evolving over time'. For this reason outcomes of concept analyses ought to be viewed tentatively. Each of the stages of the analysis involves a progressive focusing on the concept, so that the critical attributes can be identified. As early as 1989, Rodgers expressed concern about the framework's focus on reduction and a failure to examine the context in which the concept exists. Unsworth (2000) suggests that this limitation may be overcome by involving practitioners in the construction of

cases and the definition of critical attributes that will help to contextualise the concept. For the purpose of this concept analysis, evidence from those who have experienced bullying has been drawn from the literature and research (Gillen, 2002). The next step will be the formation of a focus group of midwives, who will confirm the analyses to date.

### Rationale for concept analysis

Many frameworks for concept analysis are available and it is important to choose the most appropriate method (Rodgers and Knafl, 2000). The reasons for choosing the framework as developed by Walker and Avant (1995) are three-fold. Firstly, it is one of the most common approaches. Secondly, their framework is logical and relatively easy to follow. Thirdly, it encourages the identification of antecedents and consequences, which are both essential components of a research study.

There are eight stages to the Walker and Avant (1995) method of concept analysis:

1. Select the concept of interest
2. Determine the aim of the analysis
3. Identify all uses of the concept
4. Determine the defining attributes
5. Construct a model case
6. Construct borderline, related, contrary and illegitimate cases
7. Identify antecedents and consequences
8. Define empirical referents.

#### 1. Select the concept of interest

The concept of interest is bullying. In the last decade, bullying has emerged as an important issue of great concern to employers and employees alike. In 1996, an RCM survey identified that 43% (n=197) of midwives had experienced bullying with 31% (n=61) still being bullied at the time of the survey and 50% of the bullying being carried out by 'a more senior colleague'. Some 55% (n=109) of the midwives had considered leaving midwifery as a result of being bullied. The most common types of bullying behaviour experienced by midwives include: intimidation, having skills undervalued and being humiliated in front of colleagues or clients. One of the difficulties with many bullying behaviours is that they are not very far away from those behaviours that are perceived to be 'normal' within one's place of work i.e. being criticised about the standard of work or being shouted at by someone who is angry about something.

In their survey *Working Well* (2002), the RCN identified that one in six nurses had been bullied in the past year and three in five NHS staff had witnessed bullying in the last two years. In response to a questionnaire, 37% of junior doctors reported being bullied in the previous year (Quine, 2002). At a time when retention and recruitment of staff is high on the agenda of the healthcare providers, bullying has emerged as a reason why midwives change jobs (Ball et al, 2002).

#### 2. Determine the aim of the analysis

The aim of this paper is to clarify and analyse the concept of 'bullying', in order to have a clear understanding of its meaning and application for research and practice.

#### 3. Identify all uses of the concept

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* was the initial resource used to provide a definition and common usage. A literature search was conducted using MEDLINE, CINAHL, Ovid, PsychINFO, and MIDIRS databases from 1965. To be included, the information had to be written in or translated into English. The key words used were 'bullying', 'bully', 'adult bullying', 'bullying in the workplace', 'mobbing', 'horizontal violence', 'victimisation' and 'harassment'. Further references were retrieved from journal articles and books and through personal contact with experts in the field.

Dictionary definitions are a useful starting point, as they convey the accepted ways in which the words are used. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1996) defines a bully as 'a person who uses strength or power to coerce others by fear'. It informs us that the word 'bully' originated from a term of endearment and is thought to stem from the Middle Ages and a Dutch word 'boele' – meaning lover. In North America the term 'bully' is used to mean 'very good; first rate' as a means of expressing admiration or approval; such as in the phrase 'bully for them'. The term also relates to sport with the 'bully off' forming the start of play in hockey in which two opponents strike each other's sticks three times, then go for the ball. The stronger or more skilled opponent wins. This is thought to originate from the 19th century, perhaps from bully, a scrum in Eton football, of unknown origin. The 'noun' bullying was not included in the dictionary. It is apparent that the term 'bully' has an uncertain origin and this confusion remains today with much of the literature using a variety of terms to describe the phenomenon of 'bullying'.

The variety of terms and concepts used in studies where employees are systematically picked on, harassed or pestered by superiors, co-workers and even clients, include 'psychological terror' (Leymann, 1990) and 'work abuse' (Bassmann, 1992). The concept of 'victimisation from whistleblowing' as presented by Lennane (1993) also seems to refer to a related phenomenon. Adams (1992) suggested that the terms of harassment, intimidation, aggression, bad attitude, coercive management, personality clash, poor management style, brutality and 'working in a funny way' are labels most commonly used to mean bullying (Adams, 1992: 12-3). Adams (1992: 32) also makes the important distinction between bossiness and bullying stating: 'Bossiness turns to bullying when professional abrasiveness becomes tainted with an element of personal vindictiveness'.

The health service unions use the word 'bullying' to describe shouting at or humiliating an individual, especially in front of colleagues, picking on someone, undermining someone's ability to do their job, abusive or threatening behaviour (RCM, 1996; UNISON, 1997; RCN, 2001). In the US and Canada, terms such as 'harassment' (Brodsky, 1976), 'workplace trauma' and 'employee abuse' (Wilson, 1991), 'petty tyranny' (Ashforth, 1994) have been used. In Scandinavia, the term 'mobbing' seems to be the most often used term (Einarsen, 2000; Vandekerckhove, 2003) when describing harassment of employees. In Australia, 'horizontal violence' is most often used to convey BWP (McKenna et al, 2003).

In the US, Brodsky (1976) in his book *The Harassed*

Worker defined harassing behaviour as the repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, tear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. This overt behaviour may occur over weeks or a number of years until the harassee demands that it stops or either employee leaves. While harassment may be used interchangeably with bullying, McMahon (2000) draws our attention to the bully's abuse of power as the element that differentiates harassment from bullying.

Vickers (2002: 208) has suggested that in the workplace, evil may exist in the form of bullying and that the word 'bully' is a euphemism that only serves to 'protect and diminish the nastiness of the bully's actions and intentions'.

McKenna et al (2003) carried out a survey into 'horizontal violence', also defined as 'interpersonal conflict', as experienced by new graduate nurses in New Zealand. It formed part of a national survey into the nature and impact of interpersonal conflict by both patients and nursing colleagues against registered nurses in their first year of practice. They identified behaviour that was covert and subtle in nature, although direct verbal statements that were rude, abusive and humiliating were also common.

Bullying and harassment are seen as systematic aggression and violence targeted towards one or more individuals by one individual or a group. In addition, some definitions pinpoint the adverse negative effects this behaviour may have on the victim. Existent anecdotal and clinical accounts of bullying and harassment at work also comment on the negative effects persistent harassment and bullying may have on the victim's health and wellbeing (Brodsky, 1976; Adams, 1992; RCM, 1996). To fully comprehend the consequences of bullying behaviour (regardless of intent), more empirical research is required.

#### Literary definitions of bullying

There have been many attempts to define bullying. Olweus (1991: 10) states: 'A student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative action on the part of one or more other students'. This definition can easily be applied within the context of adult bullying, by replacing students with employees. This definition stresses the repeated and negative aspects of the behaviour, implies the negative perception of the behaviour by the victim, but does not focus on the intent of the perpetrator, which is included in other definitions.

The RCM (1996) adopted the definition used by the manufacturing science and finance (MSF) trade union (1995) that focuses on the impact of the bullying behaviour on the recipient, regardless of the intent of the perpetrator. This definition gives a clear picture of the nature and consequences of bullying: 'Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions, which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress' (RCM, 1996).

This definition also includes the repeated nature of the negative behaviour and deals with the victim's perception of the behaviour. Again the intent of the perpetrator is not included and the 'abuse of power' is the central tenet of the definition.

Randall's definition 'Bullying is the aggressive behaviour arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others' (Randall, 1997: 4) places emphasis on the intent of the bully, and the negative effect on the victim, but does not point to the repeated nature of the behaviour. Interestingly, the following definition by Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001), does not focus on the negative impact, but rather the repeated nature of the behaviour and the imbalance of power: 'Bullying can be described as having taken place when it is repeated over a longer period of time and when the victim experiences difficulties in defending him or herself in this situation. It is not bullying whenever two persons of 'equal' strength are in conflict with one another or if the incident occurs only once' (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001).

'Mobbing' is the term that is commonly used in Scandinavia to describe all situations where a worker, supervisor or manager is repeatedly mistreated and victimised by fellow workers, subordinates or superiors: 'Mobbing or bullying at work occur when someone, persistently over a period of time, is on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several others, in a situation where the one at the receiving end for different reasons, may have difficulty defending him- or herself' (Einarsen, 2000).

Here again the negative effect on the victim is paramount as is the repeated nature of the behaviour. The intent of the perpetrator is not included, however the inability of the victim to defend him/herself is included. In summary, literary definitions are wide and varied with no clear evidence of consensus regarding bullying attributes.

#### 4. Determine the defining attributes

Defining attributes are the essential characteristics of the concept. These are usually those that appear most often during the process of concept analysis (Avant and Walker, 1995). The defining attributes of bullying were gleaned from the literature as follows: (1) the repeated nature of the behaviour; (2) the negative effect of the behaviour on the victim; (3) the victim finds it difficult to defend him/herself (power imbalance) (4) intent of the bully.

#### Repeated nature of the behaviour

Randall (1997) suggests that the behaviour does not have to be repeated or regular for it to be classed as bullying behaviour. Hadikin and O'Driscoll (2000) concur and state that the use of words such as 'persistent' is limiting and may add to confusion between harassment and bullying. However, many authors suggest that it is the repeated nature of the behaviour that makes it so damaging (RCN, 1996; RCM, 1996; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Einarsen, 2000; Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001) and insist on its inclusion in the definition of bullying.

#### Negative effect of the behaviour on the victim

There is general agreement that in order to be bullied, the victim needs to perceive receipt of negative behaviours, which may include threat to professional status, personal standing, isolation, overwork and destabilisation (Rayner and Hoel, 1997). These categories encompass being on the receiving end of behaviours such as nitpicking, gossiping, 'sending to Coventry',



personal insults, being given too much or too little work and having others take credit for work that the victim has been responsible for. It is this negative behaviour that can have a devastating impact. Consequences of bullying in the workplace include severe anxiety, sleep disturbance, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Quine, 1999; Namie, 2000; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2004). It may also lead to financial hardship as some victims choose to leave their place of work, rather than suffer the behaviour (Quine, 1999; Ball et al, 2002).

#### Victim finds it difficult to defend him/herself

To be considered a victim of bullying that person must find it difficult to defend him/herself in the actual situation. Typically, a victim of harassment and bullying is teased, badgered, and insulted and perceives that he/she has little recourse to retaliate (Brodsky, 1976). A person will be victimised by exposure to repeated negative acts only if the person perceives himself to be unable to defend him/herself or escape the situation. This illustrates the importance of subjective perception in the recognition and consequences of bullying behaviour. This dependency of the victim may be due to the following circumstances: social (e.g. hierarchical positions, power-relationship), physical (e.g. physical power), economic (e.g. economic dependency, private economy) psychological (e.g. the victim's self-esteem, dependent personality) (Niedl, 1996).

#### Intent of the bully

Randall (1997) suggests that the deliberate intent of the bully is an important aspect of the behaviour. However, it appears that it is the issue of intent that causes most dispute among those who have attempted to define bullying. Even the dictionary definition, which includes the imbalance of power and the negative effect on the victim, does not include the deliberate intent on the part of the bully. Rayner and Hoel (1997) suggest that the reason for a reluctance to include the intent of the bully within a definition, lies with the inherent difficulty in measurement of this aspect of the definition. The intent of the bully may be affected by perception, interpretation and organisational culture. However, it would be wrong to rule out bullying behaviour, because the perpetrator of the behaviour did not intend it in this way. The effect of the behaviour is the same, regardless of intent.

#### 5. Constructed cases

Model cases are used to reflect the defining attributes of a concept and can be made up or constructed from real-life experience (Walker and Avant, 1995). Because it is often difficult to delineate defining attributes that best represent the concept of interest, additional cases that overlap with related concepts are helpful to explore. An example of each constructed case follows:

**Model case:** Mandy has been working as a team midwife based in the community for the last three years and has recently completed her degree in midwifery. Her colleagues think highly of her and women have written glowing reports about her care. However, during the last year the team leader has repeatedly criticised her work and has on numerous occasions challenged her decision-making in front of the women and her colleagues. Mandy also feels that she is working more

than her share of on-call and weekends. Mandy has tried to address these issues with her team leader, who states that she is treating Mandy the same as everyone else. She also suggests that if Mandy isn't happy she should consider looking for another job. Mandy is beginning to dread going into work and is suffering headaches and disruption of sleep patterns.

This case portrays all the defining attributes of bullying. Mandy perceived the repeated behaviour of her boss as bullying and deliberate. It had a negative effect on her work and her health. Mandy felt powerless to change the circumstances. The team leader justifies her behaviour as being 'the norm'.

#### 6. Construct borderline, related, contrary, illegitimate cases

**Borderline case:** Borderline cases contain some of the defining attributes, but not all. Their inconsistency helps to illustrate why the model case is so accurate:

*Elizabeth was appointed as a labour ward sister two months ago and is 'finding her feet'. She is young with an excellent CV including a Master's degree and international work experience. In addition, she has two years' management experience. Everyone is being supportive apart from the older sister (Wendy) who took up her post six months earlier. Elizabeth overhears her ridicule a new initiative she is trying to introduce and feels that this person will undermine her ability to do her job if she does not take considered action. Elizabeth has lunch with her and deliberately discusses the overheard conversation. Wendy admits she was 'out of order' and explains that she felt threatened by Elizabeth's popularity, confidence and experience. They talk the issues through and both of them end up laughing about the situation. They leave the table 'friends'.*

This case demonstrates some defining attributes of bullying: the repeated nature of the negative behaviour, the negative effect that it had on her work, but it did not indicate the victim's inability to defend him/herself.

**Related case:** Related cases are instances of related concepts that do not have the defining attributes (Walker and Avant, 1995). They are similar and connected to the main concept: *Two midwives phoned in sick at 07:30 in the morning. The ward is extremely busy and bank staff are unavailable to cover the afternoon and evening shifts. The sister becomes agitated after repeated efforts to contact staff to cover. At 11am she turns to Pauline and Claire, who have already worked two long days and explains the situation to them ...telling them that she needs them to change their shifts for the day. They are not happy, but they understand the situation and agree to the changes.*

**Contrary case:** A contrary case is clearly not an instance of the concept. Its aim is to assist in defining the boundaries: *Louise was on her way down the stairs for her tea-break. She met one of the outpatient sisters on the stairs who shouted at her abruptly and told her not to go any further as there had been a spillage on the bottom step. She refused to let Louise go past and told her to use the lift.*

**Illegitimate case:** This is an inappropriate or improper use of the concept. This is helpful when one comes across a term that is completely different from all the others

(Walker and Avant, 1995):

*As a team-building exercise, one of the line managers had organised an inter-ward five-a-side hockey tournament. All the wards had to put a team forward. At the beginning of each game a midwife from each team took part in the traditional 'bully-off' (the start of play in hockey in which two opponents strike each other's sticks three times then go for the ball).*

## 7. Identify antecedents and consequences

### Antecedents

Antecedents are events or incidents that must occur prior to the occurrence of the concept. Five antecedents have been identified:

- For bullying to occur there must be a living, conscious biopsychosocial being to experience it. Non-animate beings and inanimate objects do not have the ability to experience bullying as defined in this concept analysis
- The second antecedent is a negative perception of the behaviour as perceived by the victim. The act may be openly aggressive, but as reported by McKenna (2003), it may also be subtle and covert. Ultimately, however, it is the victim's perception of the event that is important
- The third antecedent is the lack of control, either perceived or actual. Those individuals with a higher internal locus of control are able to minimise the negative effects than those with external locus of control
- The fourth antecedent is a significant power distance between the victim and the perpetrator. Einarsen (2000: 385) defines power distance as 'the interpersonal power or influence difference between two persons as perceived by the least powerful of the two'. Therefore serious conflicts between parties of equal strength or isolated conflict should not be considered bullying
- The fifth antecedent is a permissive culture within the workplace. Cultural patterns are often invisible to their own members. Culture evolves from taken-for-granted and seldom-articulated patterns of day-to-day working life that appear to constitute the natural way of doing things (Dubinskas, 1992). Freshwater (2000) suggests that nurses are generally an oppressed group who subscribe to the submissive-aggressive syndrome as described by Stein (1990). As an oppressed group, nurses tend to internalise conflict and lack of power, only for these issues to emerge as horizontal violence (bullying) directed at each other.

Leymann (1996) has identified four factors that he believes are prominent in workplaces where bullying thrives. These include deficiencies in leadership behaviour and a low moral standard.

### Consequences of bullying

Consequences are events that occur as a result of the concept. Negative effects of bullying and harassment at work may be observed at organisational or at an individual level. Research in Sweden by Leymann (1990) claimed that the combination of productivity loss by victim and work group, and costs regarding interventions by third parties, may amount to between US\$30 000 and US\$100 000 per year for each individual case of harassment at work. Wilson (1991) and Rayner and Hoel (1997) suggest that bullying and harassment at work is a form of social distress and may be a more crippling and devastating

problem for employees than all other work-related stressors together. In an interview study of 17 victims of harassment employed in a Finnish university, Björkqvist et al (1994) found that all subjects reported insomnia, various nervous symptoms, melancholy, apathy, lack of concentration and sociophobia. Ashforth (1994) in his study on destructive leadership suggests the following effects on subordinates: frustration, stress and reactance; helplessness and work alienation; lowered self-esteem and productivity; low work unit cohesiveness.

In a survey of 726 Finnish university employees, 24% of the females and 17% of the males were regarded as victims of harassment at work (Björkqvist et al, 1994). Exposure to harassment was associated with elevated levels of depression, anxiety and aggression. According to the victims, these feelings were a direct consequence of the harassment they experienced.

## 8. Define empirical referents

Empirical referents show evidence of the existence of the concept. They are categories of actual phenomena that, by their presence or existence, demonstrate the occurrence of the concept itself and the way in which it can be measured or observed. The concept of bullying requires empirical referents that show evidence of the existence of the concept from the point of view of the bully and the bullied. As with many concepts, there are significant methodological problems that impact on the valid and reliable concept of BWP. A significant methodological problem is that many victims of bullying are either unaware of the fact that they are being bullied or do not like to admit that they are or have been bullied. Also the nature and extent of bullying can vary from study to study according to whether or not the study provides an operational definition or relies on self-reporting.

Einarsen (2000) purports that operational definitions yield higher reports of bullying, than self-reports of bullying. Also different criteria affect results. For example, one study may ask for those who experience a bullying behaviour once a week (Salin, 2001), while another study measures against two acts of bullying per week (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001). Studies that rely on victims to self-report on bullying tend to report a wide range of bullying behaviours that the victims have been exposed to, but are not very accurate on prevalence rates.

The use of behavioural inventories, for example given little work to do, does not take into account the respondents' perceptions of the negative acts. Some respondents may be happy to have less work to do and may therefore not perceive it as a negative act. Therefore, to gain a full understanding of results when using behavioural inventories, there is a need to have an insight into the organisational culture of the respondents or to ensure that respondents can state the perceived effect. Also, some respondents may only have occasional exposure to several different kinds of negative acts and these people, according to operational criteria, would not be victims of bullying, while at the same time they could be deeply affected by these negative acts. Einarsen and Raknes (1997) suggest that the best way to overcome these methodological problems is to combine self-reported exposure to bullying according to an operational criterion with exposure to negative acts.

## Conclusion

This concept analysis has clearly identified that a definition of bullying needs to include the following attributes: 1) the repeated nature of the behaviour; (2) the negative effect of the behaviour on the victim; (3) the victim finds it difficult to defend him/herself (power imbalance); and (4) the intent of the bully.

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